

W. Post  
8-7-04

## Bring the Drugs From Canada

In the past six years, the cost to Montgomery County of providing prescription drug benefits to the employees and retirees of public schools has gone from \$20 million to \$40 million per year [editorial, July 31]. And that's just the school system. This is unsustainable.

Therefore, in April, we, with County Council member George L. Leventhal (D-At Large), introduced a resolution to establish a voluntary

program to allow current and retired county employees to purchase prescription drugs from Canada. After extensive review, the council's Management and Fiscal Policy Committee unanimously endorsed the idea and set a timeline for having a program running by early 2005. Most of the council supports the proposal. The council will vote on the resolution in September.

In reviewing the feasibility of a vol-

untary drug re-importation program, we reviewed safety, cost and legal concerns.

Safety is the most important issue, and it is the easiest to address. Three million Americans purchase prescription drugs from Canada, spending about \$1 billion last year. Several U.S. cities and states also buy drugs from Canada and have encountered no safety problems. Canada's drug system is one of the world's safest. The concerns raised by the Food and Drug Administration and by the pharmaceutical industry are bogus, plain and simple.

Our experts estimate that the county could save \$6 million to \$15 million a year, depending on participation rates. County employees also would benefit from reduced or eliminated co-payments. The FDA contends that our proposal is illegal, although it hasn't sued Minnesota, Wisconsin or any other government entity that has a program in place. Nevertheless, we have crafted a plan that will enable us to put our best foot forward in the unlikely event that the courts decide the issue.

We have great respect for the FDA. However, the FDA is letting politics drive its science. Twice Congress has directed the agency to design a program for the safe re-importation of Canadian drugs. So far, nothing. We also value our relationship with the biotech industry, and our resolution exempts biomed, so the program will not cost the county's biotech industry a penny.

The pharmaceutical industry says that it needs to charge U.S. consumers exorbitant prices so that it can recover its research and development costs. But the industry's marketing budgets, by a number of estimates, dwarf its R&D costs. Maybe fewer Viagra ads on TV could make prescription drugs more affordable.

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